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SUBJECT: Codel McHugh Discusses Fullest Possible Accounting
with Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan, Other Vietnamese
Officials

1. (U) Summary: Representatives and Armed Services Committee Members John McHugh, Jim Marshall and Ken Calvert met February 22 with Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan, Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, National Assembly Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Vu Mao and Vice Minister of Defense Colonel General Nguyen Huy Hieu to discuss fullest possible accounting for MIAs and the overall bilateral relationship. The Codel expressed gratitude for GVN assistance in MIA accounting activities and pressed for expanded cooperation by allowing unfettered archival access, permitting activities to resume in the Central Highlands and agreeing to a medevac helicopter to support site activities. On resuming operations in the Central Highlands, VFM Le Van Bang asked for a list of specific cases and locations and promised to do his best to persuade the relevant officials to support the resumption of Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command activities in that region. He also pledged to provide more archival materials. Vice Minister of Defense Hieu, on the subject of U.S. military training assistance, expressed in positive terms the possibility of reaching an International Military Training and Education (IMET) Agreement with the United States. The Codel's interlocutors discussed in familiar terms other areas of the bilateral relationship, urging U.S. support for Vietnam's WTO accession and describing the positive advances Vietnam has made in religious freedom and human rights. End Summary.

Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan

2. (SBU) Representatives and Members of the House Armed Services Committee John McHugh (R-NY), Jim Marshall (D-GA) and Ken Calvert (R-CA) met February 22 with Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan. The Ambassador, Pol/C, JPAC Det 2 Commander and A/DATT were also present. The Deputy Prime Minister opened by remarking on the significance of 2005 as marking the tenth anniversary of the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations and welcomed the significant progress both countries have made in advancing their ties. In addition to economic relations, cooperation in other areas, such as the fullest possible accounting of missing American personnel, HIV/AIDS care and prevention and defense, has also been significant. However, "there continue to be obstacles in the relationship," and both sides should make an effort to "resolve issues left by the past."

3. (SBU) DPM Khoan expressed the GVN's hope that the United States and Vietnam could formulate a "framework for bilateral cooperation" (NFI). He also urged the United States to support Vietnam's WTO accession, suggested that a number of agreements could be reached before the Prime Minister's proposed visit to the United States in June, called for increasing bilateral discussions and exchanges, particularly in the area of national defense and international affairs and pressed the United States to "overcome" Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations. "As you can see, there is no religious suppression in Vietnam," DPM Khoan said. On the issue of "trade difficulties," the DPM noted that resolving these "will demand our attention and efforts" and should be dealt with through "mutual respect and benefits."

4. (SBU) Representative McHugh responded by expressing the Codel's gratitude for the GVN's cooperation in our fullest possible accounting efforts to date. Additional assistance in resolving "last known alive" cases would also be welcome, as would greater archival access and GVN permission to conduct investigation and recovery operations in the Central Highlands. Greater bilateral cooperation could perhaps help Vietnam to resolve its own MIA cases. The United and Vietnam have come a long way since normalization, and, while issues remain in areas such as religious freedom, growth and progress in the relationship are key, Mr. McHugh said. He added that the United States looks forward to Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization, but expressed some concern over the National Assembly's ability to bring all Vietnamese laws into compliance with WTO rules in a timely fashion.

15. (SBU) Noting that he served in Vietnam 35 years ago as an Infantry Ranger, Congressman Marshall expressed his gratitude on behalf of all veterans for Vietnam's cooperative efforts accounting for MIA's. Access to archives without time constraints as well as permission to conduct activities in the Central Highlands are critical, Representative Marshall underlined. Congressman Calvert, noting that a large number of ethnic Vietnamese live in his district, expressed his support for expanding trade and other ties. At the close of the meeting, the Codel presented DPM Khoan with a letter to Prime Minister Phan Van Khai thanking the GVN for its assistance and urging increased cooperation in resolving missing personnel cases. Attached to the letter was a list of MIAs from the three Congressmen's districts (copy of letter faxed to EAP/BCLTV).

Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang

16. (U) During an earlier meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, the Codel members thanked the GVN for its efforts to help to resolve MIA cases and stressed the importance of continued fullest possible accounting cooperation, particularly regarding allowing both unfettered archival access with no time limit and resumption of Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) activities in the Central Highlands. Congressman McHugh observed that progress had been made recently on the issue of underwater recovery operations but added that the question of GVN permission for a medevac helicopter to support field activities remains unresolved. Representative McHugh also expressed his hope for continued GVN efforts to address human rights and religious freedom issues and, on the issue of trade, said he looks forward to the permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) vote for Vietnam.

17. (SBU) VFM Le Van Bang, in addition to praising the progress the bilateral relationship has seen over the last ten years, observed that the United States and Vietnam now have many "areas of understanding," such as in defense and MIA accounting cooperation. Vietnam has endeavored to make progress in issues related to human rights and religious freedom and hopes to continue to receive U.S. support for WTO accession. In fact, Vietnam hopes to conclude its bilateral negotiations with the United States before China and have something to announce on the occasion of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's visit to Washington in June, VFM Bang said.

18. (SBU) Turning to fullest possible accounting, VFM Bang noted that joint field activities continued to proceed successfully. On activities in the Central Highlands, the Vietnamese side has asked for specific cases and locations. Once these were in hand -- although it will be "difficult to persuade those concerned" -- VFM Bang promised to "work with you." VFM Bang also pledged to "try to hand over more archival materials."

National Assembly

19. (SBU) Meeting with National Assembly Foreign Relations Committee Chair Vu Mao, the Codel expressed its gratitude for Vietnam's support for fullest possible accounting activities and urged further and expanded cooperation in the future. Chairman Mao said he recognizes the importance of MIA accounting and pledged continued cooperation in the future. Vietnam has its own heavy burden of missing soldiers - more than 300,000 - and it is sometimes difficult to explain to the Vietnamese people why the GVN is doing more to account for American missing than Vietnamese. However, Vietnam is prepared to continue to render assistance to the United States, the Chairman said.

10. (SBU) Bilateral cooperation is flourishing, and Vietnam is grateful for U.S. assistance in implementing the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), Chairman Mao continued. Vietnam's legal system and experience are "insufficient," but Vietnam continues to learn and gain experience, such as from the recent U.S. shrimp anti-dumping case. The issue of human rights remains an area of disagreement between the United States and Vietnam, and, regrettably, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Vietnam Human Rights Act. Human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam are protected by Vietnam's Constitution, and local officials who "make mistakes" are punished and sometimes fired. The GVN's major concern is how to ensure the Vietnamese people are happy and prosperous. Some have attempted to use religion to create a separate Montagnard state, but this is unacceptable. Chairman Mao concluded by expressing his hope for greater exchanges between parliamentarians in both countries.

Vice Minister of Defense Colonel General Nguyen Huy Hieu

11. (SBU) Meeting with Vice Minister of Defense Colonel General Nguyen Huy Hieu, the Codel expressed its gratitude for Vietnam's support for fullest possible accounting activities and urged further and expanded cooperation in the future. Colonel General Hieu said he recognizes the importance of MIA accounting and considers it a humanitarian issue that the Ministry of Defense fully supports. He also noted the bilateral military-to-military relationship is growing thanks to activities such as U.S. Navy ship visits and the planned co-hosting with the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) of the multilateral Asia-Pacific Military Medical Conference (APMMC) in Hanoi in May 2005. In the recent past, Vietnam welcomed two U.S. Navy ships and plans to welcome another very soon. At some point in the future, Vietnam hopes to send a Vietnamese Navy vessel to call at a U.S. port. Colonel General Hieu offered his thanks to the USG for the support it has provided for a demining survey in three provinces and said that the GVN is moving ahead with plans for Phase Two of the project. He also expressed support for the Ministry of Defense's cooperation with the United States on the International and Military Training (IMET) program, stating, "The Ministry of Defense has asked the Government of Vietnam to sign the IMET agreement."

Comment

12. (SBU) The general tone of every call was positive and cooperative, with the CODEL's hosts offering support for continued development of the bilateral relationship across nearly every front. Notably, the Ministry of National Defense's expressed support for signing an IMET Agreement was unexpected. The Ministry has been reluctant to enter into this agreement because of the human rights vetting requirement. Vice Minister Hieu's comments indicate a change in policy and Post will actively follow up to try to close this deal and initiate an IMET program with Vietnam.

13. (U) Codel McHugh cleared this message.

MARINE